The Mullahs Storm by Thomas W. Young

A Well-Paced And Exciting Story Set In Today's War Zone

Thomas Young on The Mullahs Storm

When writing fiction, your best work may come from what scares you the most: you take pen in hand and imagine the worst. When I first flew into Afghanistan, what scared me the most wasn't the thought of getting shot down and killed. It was the thought of getting shot down and not killed.

For most aviators, an encounter with the enemy usually happens in the form of lights streaming up from the earth. It has an air of unreality about it, almost like a video game. If those lights don't hit you, they don't hurt you. But what if you had an airplane blown out from under you and you met the enemy on his terms, in his territory? What would you face on the ground? What would your buddies need you to do? Under conditions of extreme duress and hardship, would you make decisions you could live with later on?

When I went to the Air Force Survival School years ago, an instructor gave a briefing I have never forgotten. He said, Every Air Force flier shot down in Vietnam, captured, and dragged to the Hanoi Hilton sat right here in this auditorium and thought, It won't happen to me. I still think it won't happen to me. But if it did? The Mullahs Storm is an imagining of that fear.

The books action begins with the downing of a C-130 Hercules in Afghanistan, set at an indeterminate time in the war. It could have happened in 2001, or it might not have happened yet. A shoulder-fired missile blows my main characters out of their normal world and onto a journey that forces them to disregard personal safety and even personal loyalties for the sake of the mission.
My fears have become reality for some service members, and the characters in The Mullahs Storm are composites of people I have known. One of those people was an early mentor and squadron mate who had served as a Marine Corps helicopter crew chief in Vietnam. He enjoyed target shooting, and I assumed such an avid marksman would also be a hunter. But when I invited him to go duck hunting, he declined. He said, When I was shot down in Vietnam, I learned what it felt like to be hunted. I have never hunted anything since.

Though my colleagues Vietnam ordeal echoes through the book, the characters draw their motivations and mindsets from veterans of the current wars. These service members, all volunteers, come from the best-educated military ever fielded. American troops have more skill and training than ever before, and their leaders have more confidence in them. They have more individual responsibility, and in extremis, more ability to act alone when necessary. They are not cynical, but neither are they naïve about their missions and the mistakes of those who send them on those missions.

Another difference with todays military is the greater contributions of women. Their presence as part of the team no longer raises eyebrows; in fact, it is taken for granted. My novels female character, Sergeant Gold, was inspired by the women with whom I have served. Those real-life military women include some of the best pilots, navigators, and flight engineers I've known.

Other characters are from a U.S. Army Special Forces team. As a C-130 flight engineer, I often had the pleasure of working with Special Forces. Sometimes we flew SF troops during their parachute training, dropping freefall jumpers from so high that they breathed from an oxygen bottle on the way down. In addition to their other military skills, each SF soldier is fluent in a foreign language. Those guys are very smart and very tough, and I've seen them face awful conditions with spirit and humor.

I could have set this novel, or one very much like it, in Iraq or even Bosnia or Kosovo. But during airlift missions over Afghanistan, I was struck by the stark beauty of the country as seen from the air: snows of the Hindu Kush, great distances of mountains unmarked by so much as a dirt path, cold and clear night air lit by a meteor shower, rural expanses so dark the stars appeared not as scattered points but as silver dust.

The book contains scenes of violence, and sadly, that reflects reality, both past and future. Afghanistan may never completely rid itself of insurgents and warlords, jihadists and opium traffickers. The Taliban will not show up on the deck of the USS Missouri to sign an instrument of surrender. Even if American forces end combat operations tomorrow, the country will need humanitarian assistance and airlift support into the
foreseeable future. Whether U.S. troops stay or go, this will be a long war for the Afghans.

Though the idea for The Mullahs Storm had been knocking around in my head for a while, it took an in-flight emergency to get me started on the actual writing. In August of 2007, I was part of a crew flying a routine airlift mission into Osan Air Base, South Korea. On the way, we lost a hydraulic system and a generator. We declared an emergency and landed safely, greeted by the flashing lights of the crash trucks. When we taxied to the ramp, the aircraft dripped a trail of hydraulic fluid.

After we shut down, we learned we’d be stuck for days, waiting for parts. So with time to kill at Osan, one morning I went to the Base Exchange and bought a yellow legal pad and a cup of coffee. I sat on a couch in aircrew billeting, and I wrote at the top of the pad, Chapter One.

My Personal Review:
The Mullahs Storm by author Thomas W. Young, writing his first fictional novel, is a story of survival and rage set in Afghanistan sometime between 9/11 and now. The main character, Major Michael Parson, is a navigator on a C-130 Hercules Transport plane that is shot down right after take off while carrying a captured Taliban Mullah, or Cleric, out of the country. After the crash landing Parson and Army Interpreter Sergeant Gold escape on foot with the Mullah in tow in the hope that they can hang on to their prisoner until rescue comes. In their way are Taliban insurgents bent on freeing their Spiritual leader and a massive snowstorm that grounds all rescues attempts.

The book starts off very quickly (the plane is shot down on page 4) and never lets up on the pace. Since the Author has served in Afghanistan and Iraq as a member of the Air National Guard the book has a very realistic feel to it. Parson’s personality is written to rotate from shock (this can’t happen to me!) to fear, then to rage as he finds the headless body of one of the other crash survivors. Throughout the book we see Parson slowly evolve from a downed Airman to a warrior bent on successfully completing his mission. While he may have been written a little too strong in how he copes with the difficult situations it actually works. Be aware, the violence is constant in the book. It is written to be brutal but at least it is never truly graphically described.

There is one issue with the book that prevents me from rating this as five stars. The book never really ends, it just stops. Although some books can successfully have an open ending, meaning not all plot lines are resolved, here nothing is resolved. I was very surprised when the story just simply stopped. I kept going back to see if I missed something and then wondered, since I was reading an Advanced Reading Copy, if I was
missing the final chapter. It left an unfinished feel to the whole book and was a little bit disappointing.

Other than that, the book is a great read. Exciting, gut-wrenching, and very realistic. I look forward to other fictional books from Thomas Young. Highly recommended!

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